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Death and Melancholy as Recurring Motifs in Virginia Woolf's Selected Novels

Śmierć i melancholia jako powracające motywy w wybranych powieściach Virginii Woolf

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób wątki śmierci i melancholii przeplatają się ze sobą w twórczości Virginii Woolf. Ze szczególną intensywnością widoczne są one w powieściach pisarki. Przedmiotem mojej analizy są następujące dzieła: *Podróż w świat*, *Pokój Jakuba*, *Pani Dalloway*, *Do latarni morskiej*, *Lata* i *Fale*. Powieści zestawione są ze sobą nie w sposób chronologiczny, lecz tematyczny, tak by ukazać ewolucję w podejściu pisarki do interesującego mnie zagadnienia. Moją intencją jest znalezienie związków, które zobrazowałyby zależność pomiędzy wydarzeniami w życiu pisarki, jej postępującą chorobą, która doprowadziła do samobójczej śmierci, oraz jej twórczością literacką. Zasadnicza część artykułu skupia się na odnajdywaniu wspomnianych wątków w powieściach pisarki oraz na zdefiniowaniu środków i technik literackich, za pomocą których Woolf wplata je w treść swoich dzieł. Początkowo śmierć ukazana jest jako wydarzenie, które, choć tragiczne, może prowadzić do duchowego oczyszczenia i pojednania między protagonistami. Dzieje się tak w wypadku śmierci głównej bohaterki w powieści *Podróż w świat*. Śmierć przybiera w niej charakter melancholijny. Później, wraz z postępującą dezintegracją psychiki pisarki, śmierć staje się coraz bardziej bezsensowna i nieuzasadniona. Bohaterowie giną na wojnie, tak jak Jakub Flanders w powieści *Pokój Jakuba*, bądź są tej wojny ofiarami, tak jak Septimus Smith w *Pani Dalloway*, który nie mogąc zaakceptować otaczającej go rzeczywistości, popełnia samobójstwo. Z kolei główna bohaterka *Lat*, choć otoczona rodziną, umiera w samotności i poczuciu wyobcowania. Ewolucja w podejściu pisarki do zagadnienia nie rozwija się

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linearnie, lecz zmienia często swoją formę, a jej kulminacją jest powieść *Do latarni morskiej*, gdzie śmierć została ukazana w kontekście historycznym i rodzinnym, przybierając formę wydarzenia o charakterze zarówno melancholijnym, jak i tragicznym. W powieści tej zagadnienie śmierci jest również pretekstem do rozważań o charakterze filozoficznym i estetycznym. Motywy melancholii i śmierci wpisują się ponadto w paletę działań Woolf jako pisarki eksperymentalnej, czego potwierdzeniem jest powieść *Fale*. Intensywność, z jaką motywy śmierci i melancholii pojawiają się w twórczości Virginii Woolf, jest świadectwem nie tylko długotrwałego cierpienia pisarki, lecz również potwierdzeniem licznych wysiłków twórczego przetransponowania go na język literatury. Wspomniane motywy stanowią literacki kontrapunkt dla prób samobójczych, załamań psychicznych, jak również okresów rekonwalescencji, wypełnionych twórczą niemocą. Ewoluujący punkt widzenia pisarki wobec zagadnienia prowadzić może do wniosku, że jej tragiczna śmierć była finalnym stadium procesu dojrzewania decyzji o samobójstwie, czego wspomniane powieści są potwierdzeniem.

Słowa kluczowe: wyobcowanie, katharsis, pocieszenie, pożegnanie, rozpad osobowości, zbawienie, samookreślenie się, cierpienie, samobójstwo, przemiana

Key words: alienation, catharsis, consolation, farewell, mental disintegration, salvation, self-identification, suffering, suicide, transmutation

The idea behind the paper is to analyze, on the basis of some selected novels by Virginia Woolf, how death and the feeling of melancholy transmute into her writings anticipating her suicidal death. The analysis is aimed at exploring the subject and its development in Woolf's literary oeuvre, with special regard to *Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Years* and *The Waves*. The books under examination are not explored chronologically as the paper intends to delve into thematic links between the novels and the conceptual patterns that they share rather than focus on the linear and diachronic development of the concept in her writings.

> Dearest,
>
> I feel certain that I am going
> mad again: I feel we can't go
> through another of these terrible times.
> And I shant recover this time, I begin
> to hear voices, and cant concentrate.
> So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have
> given me
> the greatest possible happiness. You
> have been in every way all that anyone
> could be. I dont think two
> people could have been happier till
> this terrible disease came. I cant
> fight it any longer, I know that I am
> spoiling your life, that without me you
> could work. And you will I know.

You see I cant even write this properly. I
cant read. What I want to say is that
I owe all the happiness of my life to you.
You have been entirely patient with me &
incredibly good. I want to say that –
everybody knows it. If anybody could
have saved me it would have been you.
Everything has gone from me but the
certainty of your goodness. I
cant go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two
people
could have been happier than we have been.

V. [sic!] (Cunningham 2006: 6, 7)

The farewell letter that Virginia Woolf wrote before her death was short and precise. It was dated "Tuesday" and addressed to her husband, Leonard Woolf. A similar letter was left for her sister, Vanessa Bell. Hermione Lee, Woolf's biographer, claims that she might have written the words intended for her husband on Tuesday, 18 March 1941, that is ten days before her suicide (Lee 1997: 756). The week preceding her death had witnessed severe incendiary bombing by the Luftwaffe near Rodmell, the place where the Woolfs lived at the time. The weather was adverse as it rained heavily on that day. After a walk she took, Woolf returned home, soaked and in the state of mental unrest, claiming that she had fallen into one of the local dykes. Another letter, this time undated, which Woolf's husband found on 28 March, was a different one, but very similar in its somber tone. Even when read cursorily, Virginia Woolf's words seem rational and carefully premeditated. It is not a letter written by a hysterical and mentally-unbalanced person, but by someone in despair, who sees no future for recovery and at the same time realizes what a burden she is for her husband. The mental unrest is also reflected in the careless spelling and the remark concerning Virginia Woolf's inability to write the letter properly. From this perspective, her dramatic decision can be perceived as an act of conscious courage and dignity. The fact that the letter was hidden for more than a week indicates that Woolf was fully aware of her mental state and deliberately planned her suicide. Mitchell Leaska points out that there is some resemblance between the final words of the epistolary valediction and the sentence uttered by Terence Hewet on the death of his fiancée, Rachel Vinrace in Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out* (Leaska 2000: 440). When comparing Hewet's words which read: *No two people have ever been so happy as we have been* (Woolf 1992: 334) with those written by Woolf almost thirty years later: *I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been*, one could arrive at the conclusion that her life had come full circle with the motif of death at its centre.

Death and melancholy are a recurring theme in Virginia Woolf's literary output. Prematurely bereaved by her mother, Julia Prinsep, Woolf witnessed several

deaths among the members of her family, which affected her sanity and finally contributed to the suicidal death in the River Ouse. Throughout her childhood and youth, Woolf was exposed to a series of traumatic emotional shocks. Apart from her mother's, she had to accept, among many others, the deaths of her half-sister, Stella, brother, Thoby who died of typhoid fever, and later on her nephew, Julian who got killed during the Spanish Civil War. Both Woolf's parents had been widowed before they got married. Her father, Leslie Stephen's life was also beset by a series of personal tragedies as the daughter, Laura, he had to his first wife Harriet nèe Thackerey, went insane and was institutionalized in the asylum until her death in 1945. Being ravaged with grief and distress, Virginia Woolf suffered a number of mental breakdowns, the first two of which coincided with her parents' subsequent deaths in 1895 and 1904 respectively. As a child she also experienced a series of alleged sexual abuses on the part of her half-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth, which together with her early bereavement led to her becoming anorectic and culminated not only in numerous mental crises but also in attempted suicides.

The times in which Woolf lived were extremely turbulent. The literary references to the two world wars are visible in the writer's novels. It was during World War 2 that Woolf committed suicide by drowning herself. Although not being directly involved in the military operations, the writer had to leave London which was severely bombed by the Luftwaffe. Woolf was a Londoner, particularly associated with Bloomsbury, the district which suffered a lot during the Blitz. Also the family situation kept the artist under a constant emotional strain. Woolf's husband, Leonard, was a Jew. Thanks to the information from Adrian Stephen, Woolf's brother who worked for the British Government, the spouses were aware of the situation of the Jews on the Continent and planned to commit suicide together in case of the German victory.

Woolf's mental problems were a subject of various analytical studies. During the intervals between the intermittent bouts of her illness, the writer devoted herself to a variety of intellectual tasks, such as writing novels, which considerably exhausted her both physically and mentally resulting in incapacitating pains, hallucinations, mental breakdowns and suicide attempts. Woolf's anguish was also augmented by her oversensitivity to critical comments which were not always favourable.

Grief and suffering found an outlet in Virginia Woolf's literary activity. The traces of death, trauma and melancholy can be easily found in her novels and even feminist essays. *To the Lighthouse* is an elegiac novel, subliminally dedicated to Woolf's parents. One of the protagonists of *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus Smith, who can be perceived as the writer's alter ego, haunted by the horrors of war and the psychiatric maltreatment, commits suicide. The theme of death recurs in the most experimental of Woolf's novels *The Waves.* The motifs of death reappear in other novels, such as *The Voyage Out*, *Jacob's Room* and *The Years*. In *Between the Acts* death is not addressed explicitly. Nevertheless, in her

last novel, Woolf seems to bid farewell to the civilization which approaches its end as a result of the totalitarian war. Death also weaves its way into *A Room of One's Own*, the essay in which Shakespeare's imaginary sister kills herself, and another essay *On Being Ill*, in the final chapter of which Lady Louisa Watford's husband gets killed while falling from the horseback during the hunt, which leads to his wife's agony manifested by crushing a heavy velvet curtain.

The New Penguin English Dictionary defines melancholy as *an abnormal mental condition characterized by feelings of extreme depression and worthlessness* (p. 865, s.v. "melancholy"). In the introduction to the Polish edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the fundamental work by the seventeenth-century English theologian, Robert Burton, Anna Zasuń claims that the notion of melancholy is a broad general concept which cannot be defined explicitly (Zasuń, Introduction to Burton 2000: XXVII). Since the times of antiquity until the present day there have been different definitions postulated, which only testifies to the central role attributed to the category. Melancholy has become the subject of theological, philosophical and medical disputes, more or less loosely associated with the views based on rational premises. Over the centuries iconographic representations of melancholy have become a specific cultural code. It was associated with lunacy, divine frenzy or divine punishment. In their seminal work *Saturn and Melancholy* Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl perceive melancholy as a psychiatric disorder, temperament, organic secretion or the state of mind (Klibansky et al. 2009: 5). The end of the Middle Ages witnessed distinction between black and bitter melancholy, which was understood as gloominess, serious reflection or intellectual pursuit. The radical change in the approach towards melancholy appeared in the fifteenth century in Florence, where in certain circles it started to be perceived as an exceptional existential and intellectual experience.[1] Obviously, the above list does not exhaust the whole

[1] Among various concepts of melancholy, one can come across that of *acedia*, the Latin term which etymologically derives from the ancient Greek word standing for grief (*The New Penguin English Dictionary*, p. 10, s.v. "acedia"). *Acedia* was regarded as a mental ailment of the monks living and praying in loneliness. St Thomas even perceived it as one of the cardinal sins. The concept of melancholy has changed over the centuries and nowadays it is compared by Jean Starobinski to a state of apathy and doubt in salvation. Marek Bieńczyk points out that it was the demon of the South that was responsible for *acedia*. It was supposed to choose its victims when the sun was in its zenith or when somebody's life reached its middle stage. It is interesting to point out that the association between the sun and the state of melancholy subsequently recurs in the title of Julia Kristeva's book *Black Sun*. The term connected with the notion in question is also that of *spleen*, which became popular in the English language in the eighteenth century. The word *spleen*, in its archaic meaning, signified the state of apathy, resignation and depression. It was associated with the anatomical organ which was considered to be the seat of melancholy and ill humour. The concept had its origin in the ancient theory of humours governing human life. At present the word denotes the feeling of violent anger which is expressed in a sudden way. The other terms connected with melancholy, which were postulated as the central motifs in the literature of the turn of the eighteenth and ninetieth centuries, are *Weltschmerz*

array of definitions postulated over the centuries. However, one thing is certain. The notion of melancholy has always been ambivalent, which is also evident in the work of contemporary scholars.[2]

The Voyage Out is Virginia Woolf's first novel. It is difficult to read it out of the context of various traumatic experiences and emotional attachments she was exposed to between 1904 and 1915 (Hussay 1995: 337). In 1904 Woolf's father died of cancer. Two years later he was followed by his son, Thoby. When witnessing their deaths, Woolf had been already half-bereaved and additionally had to tackle the problem of the death of her half-sister, Stella who had become a surrogate mother to her. It is worth mentioning that Stella passed away being only three months married to Jack Hills. Therefore, it is not surprising that apart from the issue of death, the novel focuses on the problem of marriage. Although Virginia Woolf married Leonard Woolf in 1912, that is three years before the publication of the novel, she had to cope with the two marital proposals before her final decision was made. Both suitors: Lytton Strachey and Walter Lamb were rejected, which subsequently was reflected in the last but one chapter of the book, in which Alfred Perrott proposes to Evelyn Murgatroyed, but to no avail. Before becoming Leonard Woolf's wife, Virginia Woolf had to come to terms with her sister's marriage. Vanessa had accepted Clive Bell's proposal in 1906, that is very soon after their brother's death. Rachel Vinrace, the main protagonist of the novel, epitomizes therefore the three real characters: Thoby who like Rachel died at the age of 24, Stella who widowed her husband soon after their marriage and Virginia Woolf herself who, apart from accepting her own new marital status, had to embrace the trauma of her siblings' deaths (Hussey 1995: 336, 337).

Originally intended to be entitled *Melymbrosia*, *The Voyage Out* is a conventional novel in twenty-seven chapters. The book, the plot of which is set about 1905, was dedicated to Leonard Woolf. It focuses on Rachel Vinrace who after her mother's death is brought up by her aunts in Richmond. Accompanied by a group of friends and relatives, she sets off on an overseas voyage on one of her father's ships. Having called at Lisbon, they finally arrive at Santa Marina, an

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and *Wertherism* or *Ischschmertz*. The former describes the pessimistic feeling resulting from the imperfection of the world, the latter ones are ascribed to Goethe's epistolary and autobiographical novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers,* and are generally associated with the state of resignation and helplessness (Zasuń, Introduction to Burton, XXVII).

[2] George Steiner treats melancholy almost as a synonym of humanity. Marek Bieńczyk describes it as its own allegory. Wojciech Bałus notices in it the universal condition of the world. Julia Kristeva perceives it as a specific relationship with the world. Tadeusz Sławek defines it as the weakness of being. In psychology and psychiatry melancholy has remained synonymous with depression, sadness as well as neurotic disorders, the confirmation of which is the definition postulated in Antoni Kępiński's book *Melancholia*. With time melancholy started to be described as any unidentified state of dejection which appears without any apparent reason, referred to by Fernand Pessõi as "nothing which hurts" (Zasuń, Introduction to Burton, XXIX).

island off the coast of South America, where Rachel meets Terence Hewet and falls in love with him. Being engaged to Terence, she takes a trip upstream the local river. On coming back from the trip, Rachel falls ill and dies.

Just like in the case of Virginia Woolf's other books, death and melancholic grief are at the centre of *The Voyage Out*. Both Rachel and Terence are half-bereaved. They take to each other, but their love cannot be fulfilled due to Rachel's premature death. What Woolf attempts to do in the novel is not to experiment with the plot and characters, but rather find the meaning to the tragic events they are exposed to and communicate their significance to the readers, at the same time finding a cathartic consolation herself. Although the loss of so many relatives might seem unusual to the contemporary reader, it was not alien to the Victorians whose legacy was bestowed on Woolf by her father. In the introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Jane Wheare makes the comparison between the writer's approach and that expressed by Tennyson in *In Memoriam AHH*, the most representative Victorian poem as regards the treatment of death and sorrow. In a number of elegiac poems Tennyson grieves over the premature death of his friend and counselor Arthur Hallam. However, what the poet does is not only outpouring his sorrow. The elegy is a pretext to rethink the traditional Christian faith with special regard to the problem of suffering. The poet's intention is not to find easy answers to the conundrum of death as well as the feeling of grievance that it naturally causes. What the poem is remarkable for is Tennyson's sensitivity with which he tackles the loss. In this respect the poem anticipates not only *The Voyage Out* but also much of the twentieth century literature (Wheare, Introduction to Woolf, *Voyage Out*, XVI). Another affinity between Woolf's and Tennyson's approaches results from the fact that both of them do not treat untimely death as a meaningless experience. At first it is hard to understand Rachel's pointless demise. It is only through sorrow that it evokes in its witnesses that we come to understand that although destructive, the event does not undermine the sense of a purpose behind human experience, especially when followed by sympathy and consolation.

When writing *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf had already experienced two mental collapses, both resulting from her parents' deaths. In the process of creating the novel the writer also suffered a lot. In 1913, soon after the decision of the publication of the book was made, Woolf, as a result of total exhaustion, attempted suicide. In 1915 she stayed twice in nursery homes. Being afraid of the poor reception of the book, she rewrote, corrected and revised it several times, which resulted in creating the three versions of it. The description of Rachel's delirium which preceded her death seems to be deeply rooted in Virginia Woolf's own despair. The main character's hallucinations resemble the state of neurotic disorder Woolf was so well acquainted with:

> On this day indeed Rachel was conscious of what went on around her. She had to come to the surface of the dark, sticky pool, and a wave seemed to bear her up and down with it; she had ceased to have any will of her own; she lay on the top of the wave conscious

> of some pain, but chiefly of weakness. The wave was replaced by the side of a mountain. Her body became a drift of a melting snow, above which her knees rose in huge peaked mountains of bare bone (Woolf 1992: 327).

Quentin Bell who draws on the novel when referring to Woolf's mental disorder in the writer's biography points out that:

> In the final chapters of "The Voyage Out" she had been playing with fire. She had succeeded in bringing some of the devils who dwelt within her mind hugely and gruesomely from the depths, and she had gone too far from comfort" (Bell vol. 2, 1992: 42).

The moment of a state of melancholy, contemplation and acceptance comes in the same chapter when Terence stands over Rachel's deathbed realizing that their final parting is inevitable:

> The light being dim, it was impossible to see any change in her face. An immense feeling of peace came over Terence, so that he had no wish to move or to speak. The terrible torture and unreality of the last days were over and he had come out into perfect certainty and peace (Woolf 1992: 333).

The motif of melancholy takes on a consolatory or even serene dimension in the scene. Rachel's death is perceived as a moment of salvation for both the sufferer and those who witnessed her agony and death. It is interesting to compare and contrast Woolf's approach with the rendition of melancholy and death in Julia Kristeva's book *Black Sun*. As the object of her analysis and discussion she takes Hans Holbein's controversial 1522 painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. In the picture Christ is presented as a man just taken from the cross. Unlike other renditions of the subject, the corpse in Holbein's painterly version bears no sign of beauty, warmth or serene tranquility. It is a faithful representation of a dead body of a man who has just undergone unbelievable torments before being crucified. It is the body which is just about to undergo the process of biological decomposition. At first Kristeva renders the picture on the basis of an account given by Ippolit, a peripheral character in *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Then she passes on to her own interpretation of the painting. What she emphasizes is the feeling of hopelessness and futility of the offering, which accompanies the image of Christ forsaken by the Father:

> The unadorned representation of human death, the well-nigh anatomical stripping of the corpse convey to viewers an unbearable anguish before the death of God, here blended with our own, since there is not the slightest suggestion of transcendency (Kristeva 1989: 110).

A similar description appears in Woolf's eighth novel *The Years*. The book, written sixteen years after *The Voyage Out*, is a chronicle of the lives of the Pargiter family. In the first chapter, somehow in the background of the main events, we witness the death of Rose, the mother of the family. The event is observed through the eyes of Rose's husband and children who are anxiously

awaiting the end of the woman's life. The atmosphere is stifling and oppressive. The members of the family secretly hope that Rose will die soon to everyone's relief. The very fact of death is conveyed implicitly through the letter that Rose's son sends to her relative. Before that, the moment of the decease is observed by Delia, Rose's daughter, who witnesses the event dispassionately. The description is reminiscent of Kristeva's account of Holbein's painting:

> There she was – soft, decayed but everlasting, lying in the cleft of the pillows, an obstacle, a prevention, an impediment to all life (Woolf 2012: 792).

Obviously, when describing Rose's death, Woolf draws on her own traumatic experience of a child growing up in a Victorian family, the mother of which dies, leaving the children with a gloomy and oppressive father, embodied in the character of Colonel Abel Pargiter, who somehow resembles Leslie Stephen. Similarly to Woolf's first book, *The Years* was written in the period marked by a series of losses she had to contend with. Lytton Strachey died in 1932, which contributed directly to Dora Carrington's suicide. Their deaths were followed by parting with George Duckworth and most of all with Roger Fry. Woolf also witnessed the deaths of the writers she was acquainted with, such as John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett and Katherine Mansfield. What also links *The Years* with *The Voyage Out* is the torment that accompanied its creation. Woolf always referred to the book as difficult and painful to write (Hussey 1995: 389).

Jacob's Room, Woolf's third novel, was written in 1922, which is four years after the end of the Great War. The references and allusions to the first of the totalitarian cataclysms that she witnessed are evident in the novel, for instance, in the very name of the eponymous hero, Jacob Flanders whose surname etymologically derives from one of the goriest battles of the Great War. According to Hussey, the book assumes the form of an elegy for the young men who perished in the war fields (Hussey 1995: 126). Although none of Woolf's relatives was directly involved in military operations, the writer was more or less closely associated with the young men who knew the atrocities of the war from their first-hand experience.[3] The motif of war, although often recurring in the book, does not dominate its plot. *Jacob's Room* in its elegiac tone is dedicated not only

[3] There are two iconic characters that need to be mentioned in this context. The first was Siegfried Sassoon, an English poet and army officer, who became known to Woolf through Lady Ottoline Morell. Woolf reviewed his *The Old Huntsman and other Poems*, praising the quality of his poetry. The other, Rupert Brooke, exerted even profounder influence on her. Brooke, a paragon of English patriotism in the early stages of the Great War, was a poet who died from blood poisoning at the age of twenty-seven while being on active service in the Aegean. Woolf had known him through her holidays in Saint Ives and had grown close to him in the 1910s. Like Thoby Stephen, Brooke studied at Cambridge. In 1911 Woolf stayed with the poet at his home at Grantchester, where they developed a strong bond. After the poet's death in 1915, the writer reviewed *The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke with a Memoir* by Edward Marsh as well as Walter de la Mare's *Rupert Brooke and the Intellectual Imagination*.

to the whole tragic generation of the young Englishmen, but also assumes a form of a lament for the writer's personal loss (Hussey 1995: 126).

Just like the other novels by Woolf, also *Jacob's Room* is deeply rooted in her biography. The motif of death is tied up to the character of Jacob who dies at the age of twenty-five while fighting in the fields of Flanders. Nancy Topping Bazin and Avrom Fleishmman point out that there is a strong affinity between Jacob Flanders and Thoby Stephen, Woolf's brother who passed away at the same age as the eponymous character in the book (Hussey 1995: 126). Although both men die in different circumstances, Jacob in the battle and Thoby after taking a trip to Albania and Greece, they still bear a strong resemblance. Both study at Cambridge and both take the same trips to Greece.[4] Just like in the case of Rose Pargiter, Jacob's death is conveyed implicitly. Woolf applies a very interesting formal experiment when dealing with the motif of demise. In the final scene of the novel we can see Betty Flanders, Jacob's mother accompanied by his friend, Richard Bonamy, who came to clear Jacob's room after his death. They are both surprised at the fact that everything had been left intact as if Jacob were to come back home. Death by no means assumes a heroic shape in the last chapter of the book. It is symbolized by a pair of old shoes that Mrs Flanders aimlessly holds, being at a loss to explain what she is supposed to do with them:

> Jacob! Jacob! cried Bonamy, standing by the window. The leaves sank down again.
> "Such confusion everywhere!" exclaimed Betty Flanders, bursting open the bedroom door.
> Bonamy turned away from the window.
> "What am I to do with these, Mr Bonamy?"
> She held out a pair of Jacob's shoes (Woolf 2012: 124).

Thoby's death as a recurrent motif reappears in Woolf's seventh novel, *The Waves*. The book, considered the writer's most experimental literary attainment, was written in 1931. It consists of a series of soliloquies delivered by each of six characters. The monologues make up nine parts of the book, named by the novelist as episodes. The episodes alternate with the italicized interludes describing the passage of the sun from dawn to dusk as well as the rise and fall of the waves and the gradual passage of the seasons, the technique also applied in *The Years*. We are confronted with six accounts of the characters' lives, each revealed identically, but with the emphasis put on the recurring motifs and phrases ascribed individually to each of the protagonists. The last soliloquy is spoken by Bernard who strives to sum up the biographical events and see the separate stories as a whole.

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[4] As regards Thoby Stephen, it is worth remembering that the very name of Thoby was the popular way in which Woolf's family addressed her brother. His first name was Julian. Two years after his death Vanessa Bell named her first son after her deceased brother. Julian Bell was killed working as an ambulance driver during the Civil War in Spain in 1937, the event being another loss that ravaged Woolf's life.

The motif of death is represented in the book by two characters: Percival and Rhoda. The former hardly ever appears in the novel. We learn about him through the perspective of perception of his six friends. In the fourth episode, during a farewell dinner, they meet to say good-by to Percival who is leaving for India. The dinner is a pretext for recollection of what has happened in their lives so far. In the fifth episode Percival dies in India at the age of twenty-four, which evokes the feeling of bereavement in everyone. Each of the characters reacts differently to their friend's death. Bernard, despite the birth of his son, cannot come to terms with the loss. He goes to the National Gallery, where he contemplates Italian masters. Rhoda, hearing the call of death in her mind, decides to pick violets in Oxford Street as an offering to Percival. Then, having experienced a revelation about art during the concert she attends, Rhoda goes to Greenwich and throws the bunch of violets into the River Thames. When describing the very act of offering, Woolf creates a poignant, melancholic and painterly scene conveyed in the speech delivered by Rhoda:

> Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose. Now I will at last free the checked, the jerked--back desire to be spent, to be consumed. We will gallop together over desert hills where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth. I throw my violets, my offering to Percival (Woolf 1994b: 130).

It is interesting to notice that in the interlude that follows Percival's death the sun begins its decline anticipating the social crisis in the protagonists' relationships (Hussey after Ruotolo 1995: 214). For Hussey "Percival is another attempt by Woolf at writing some kind of elegy for her dead brother Thoby" (Hussey 1995: 213). The resemblance between Percival and Woolf's brother is unquestionable. Both die at relatively the same age and both are reserved and socially withdrawn.

Rhoda is another alienated, tragic character for whom life is a terrifying prospect. Just like Woolf herself, she has visions, stumbles upon the puddles that she cannot cross, hears voices, such as "the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head" and has problems with self-identification (Woolf 1994b: 125, 130). Diane Gillespie in her book *Sisters' Arts* draws on the similarity between Vanessa Bell's faceless portraits and Rhoda's feeling of having no face (Gillespie 1991: 176). Woolf's embodiment finally commits suicide, which we learn about in Bernard's final speech (Woolf 1994b: 228).

The image of death seems to dominate in the final episode of the book. The opening phrase: "The sun had sunk", evokes the associations with the life cycle that reached its end (Woolf 1994b: 186). Bernard is left alone and contemplates the vision of the past recalling his deceased friends:

> Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India. I strike spurs

> into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death! (Woolf 1994b: 234).

Rhoda is not the only character that commits suicide in Woolf's novels. The motif of suicidal death is also tackled in *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf's fourth novel. The book focuses on two main characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, whose stories are juxtaposed with each other. Clarissa is a fifty-two-year-old upper-class hostess preparing a party which is going to be attended by the prime minister. Woolf contrasts her story with that of Septimus Smith, who is taken by his wife to see a psychiatrist. The climactic moment of the book is Clarissa's party which coincides with Septimus's death by suicide.

The very event is preceded by a careful process of analyzing Septimus's hallucinations. The effect is achieved by applying the technique known as "the tunneling". By entering her character's mind and penetrating his thoughts, Woolf creates metaphorical images which combine reality with the distortions produced by a shell-shocked mind. Septimus's thoughts are presented in the form of flashes: disconnected metaphors in which subconscious associations and conscious observations of the external reality overlap each other. The character's obsessions result from the atrocities of the Great War and finally lead to his suicidal death. By tunneling into Septimus's past the narrator explains that he had fought in the worst war campaigns. Shattered by the death of his friend, Evans, Smith returns to England and undergoes a psychiatric treatment. In spite of this, he gradually goes insane. His death is inevitable. Confronted with the prospect of being institutionalized, Septimus throws himself out of the window of his lodging-house in Bloomsbury and is pierced by the iron spikes of the railing below.

> Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holms was at the door. "I'll give it you!" he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs Filmer's area railing (Woolf 1996: 164).

Death, although brutal, is presented in *Mrs Dallowa* in a sketchy and matter-of-fact manner. There is a lot of commotion that accompanies Smith's death. The voices and perspectives of perception mingle as the writer applies a shifting point of view. The question arises if Septimus Smith could be Virginia Woolf's alter ego. The parallels between Woolf and her character, their suicide, in particular, are plausible (Hussey 1995: 259) Similarly to Woolf, he hears birds talking in Greek and just like her he is instructed by the doctors to stop thinking about himself. It is also worth remembering that Woolf threw herself out of the window in 1904, but sustained no major injuries.

Death assumes a melancholic form in Woolf's fifth novel *To the Lighthouse*. Published in 1927, the book can be perceived as an elegy, written as a tribute to the novelist's mother, represented by the character of Mrs Ramsey. The action in the novel is minimized and the events that occur are scarce. The main theme of the book focuses on "the moments of being", the characters' psychological experiences juxtaposed with the lyrical descriptions of passing seasons. Through

the technique of stream of consciousness and by using special imagery, Woolf creates an atmospheric and impressionistic record in which the conflict between male and female principles can be observed. The meaning of life is presented in contrast with the passage of time in comparison with which human existence seems insignificant. The novel is constructed in the form of a triptych, with its first part "The Window" and the third one "The Lighthouse" connected by the interlude "Time Passes". The first part focuses on a few hours of one afternoon. It functions as an exposition of the settings and the presentation of the main characters. The interlude, which is the shortest in length, comprises the span of ten years. The third part describes the events of one morning and noon. The motif of death is particularly visible in the second part which encompasses a period of time during which some significant and tragic events happen. Mrs Ramsey dies a sudden death, her daughter, Prue dies in childbirth and her son, Andrew gets killed during the battle in France.

Mrs Ramsey in the book symbolizes life, fertility, natural warmth, creativity, intuition, moderation and sensuous beauty, that is the qualities very remote from those associated with melancholy and death. She creates an aura around herself and in doing so influences other people's behaviour. The embodiment of femininity, Mrs Ramsey appears to be a guardian of her family. Her influence on other people is so strong that even after her death she seems to be present on the stage of events. The final journey to the lighthouse assumes a symbolic meaning, as it seems to be the realization of her dream. When recollecting Mrs Ramsey, Lily Brisco experiences a sacrificial vision in which she can see her proceeding across the Elysian Fields, referred to in the book as the "fields of death":

> For days after she had heard of her death she had seen her thus, putting her wreath to her forehead and going unquestionably with her compassion, a shadow, across the fields (Woolf 1994a: 132).

The motif of death is also present in the novel through the description of settings, comprising both nature and house interiors. Woolf draws on the world of vegetation to enhance the prevailing spirit of deterioration and the relentless passage of time. The effect she produces in the interlude evokes the atmosphere of negligence and decadence. As the time passes by what used to flourish in an orderly manner falls into decline. By describing the changes in the world of vegetation, Woolf depicts the aftermath of war:

> Tortoise-shell butterflies burst from the chrysalises and pattered their life out of the window-pane. Poppies sowed themselves among the dahlias; the lawn waved with long grass; giant artichokes towered among the roses; a fringe carnation flowered among the cabbages; while the gentle tapping of a weed at the window had become, on winter's night, a drumming from sturdy trees and thorned briars which made the whole room green in summer (Woolf 1994a: 100).

Similar feelings are evoked in the literary seascapes that appear in Woolf's novel. In the interlude, the benevolent image of the sea disappears. It assumes a malevolent character and its destructive aspect is strongly amplified (Grove-White 1982: 54). The ominous character of the messages conveyed in this part of the novel is emphasized by the depictions of the sinister image of the sea they are preceded by. It is after introducing the vision of the rough sea that Woolf informs the reader of Mrs Ramsey's death. The menacing picture of the sea symbolizes destruction and demise:

> Also the sea tosses itself and breaks itself, and should any sleeper fancying that he might find on the beach an answer to his doubts, a sharer of his solitude, throw of his bed-clothes and go down by himself to walk on the sand, no image with semblance of serving and divine promptitude comes readily to hand bring the night to order and making the world reflect the compass of the soul (Woolf 1994a: 93).

Somewhere in the background of the description, which is enhanced by the application of the square bracket, the character of Mr Ramsey subtly reappears. Trying to come to terms with his wife's death, he aimlessly stretches his arms out in the dark.

> [Mr Ramsey stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsey having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty] (Woolf 1994a: 93).

The symbolic qualities of death and melancholy can be detected in the descriptive techniques that Woolf applies. The contrast between darkness and light is used in the second part of the novel to evoke the atmosphere of havoc and the prevailing spirit of nothingness:

> So with the lamps all put out, the moon sunk, and a thin rain drumming on the roof a downpouring of immense darkness began. Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood, the profusion of darkness which creeping in at key-holes and crevices, stole round window blinds, came into bedrooms, swallowed up here a jug and basin, there a bowl of yellow dahlias, there the sharp edges and firm bulk of a chest of drawers (Woolf 1994a: 93).

The fragment functions as an ominous hint that the forces of nature and chaos will soon take control over the house and the people who live there. The extinguishing of lights in the house suggests that it is going to be exposed to the threats and dangers symbolized by darkness.

The motif of melancholy and death can also be traced in the descriptions of the interiors and the buildings seen from the outside. In the dimly lit inner spaces the significance of human existence is marginal. The derelict house symbolizes the destruction of its inhabitants' achievements by time and uncontrolled nature. As the process of decline continues and the reminders of human existence become disfigured or slowly disappear, the application of light by the novelist changes its character. The movements of air and light are so slow that

the description becomes eventless. The motif of melancholy and death in *To the Lighthouse* is evoked by creating the atmosphere of stillness and stagnation:

> Now, day after day, life turned, like a flower reflected in water, its clear image on the wall opposite. Only the shadows of the trees, flourishing in the wind, made obeisance on the wall, and for a moment darkened the pool in which light reflected itself (Woolf 1994a: 93).

To recapitulate, death and melancholy as recurring motifs are clearly apparent in Virginia Woolf's novels. Woolf, whose life was ravaged with traumatic events, draws on her own autobiographical experience, be it the loss of the family members and friends or the political circumstances which contribute to or directly cause their deaths. The concept of death evolves in Woolf's novels. At first she perceives it as meaningful and redemptive. Then, simultaneously with the progress of her mental disintegration and gradual personal crises, death assumes the quality of a meaningless and tragic event, manifesting itself in the cases of the characters who die in remote lands, perish in the battles of the Great War or commit suicide, not being able to confront reality. Death in Woolf's novels is often accompanied by the aura of melancholy which evokes or anticipates tragic occurrences the characters in her novels are exposed to. Judging by the frequency with which motifs of death and melancholy reappear in Woolf's work, one could arrive at the conclusion that the discussed novels constitute a personal record of her struggle with existential problems and some tragic events which result from them. By writing Woolf not only achieves a cathartic effect, but also justifies her final decision of committing suicide. Following the Horatian credo "Non omnis moriar", she erects her own monument herself while still alive. Unlike Horace, however, she makes use of grief and suffering.

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